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RETHINKING THE "HOW": DEVELOPING CREATIVITY IN THE UNDERGRADUATE MUSIC THEORY CLASSROOM

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A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE SCHOOL
OF MUSIC

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Vivian Luong, Chair

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Dr. Nathan Dougherty

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Sincerely,

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, music educators have noted a decline in student engagement, understanding, and application of the material that is taught in the undergraduate music theory classroom. In response to this alarming trend, many teachers are calling for reform of the traditional curriculum in order to make music theory more relevant to the 21st-century student. Most notably, the College Music Society's Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major (TFUMM) has emphasized large-scale curricular change through the pillars of creativity, diversity, and integration across all aspects of university music programs, including the music theory curriculum (2016). This thesis, however, will argue that meaningful transformation must also occur at the classroom level. Without addressing what goes on in the day-to-day classroom environment—the "how" of pedagogy, changes to repertoire or curriculum design are unlikely to completely resolve issues of student disengagement and relevancy.

By drawing on scholarship in creative music theory pedagogy and educational psychology, particularly the work of Timothy Chenette, Albert Bandura, and Benjamin Bloom, this thesis will explain the psychology of creativity and how it benefits our students to reframe music theory as a creative art. By revising TFUMM's first pillar of creativity with Chenette's definition of the concept as "the generation of novel ideas that are valuable and appropriate within a given domain," I argue that a complete reform of the traditional curriculum does not completely address the issue of student disengagement, and that repositioning Chenette's version of creativity as an essential component of every-day learning will prove even more beneficial for our students.

To support this claim, this thesis first examines the limitations of current undergraduate theory curricula and evaluates existing reform efforts. Then, chapter two outlines Chenette's six

pedagogical strategies for fostering creativity in the classroom including: 1) the integration of knowledge and creative practice; 2) the use of productive examples; 3) the incorporation of downtime; 4) the encouragement of intrinsic motivation; 5) the cultivation of a safe learning environment; and 6) the promotion of collaboration. Finally in chapter three, the thesis presents three original classroom activities—Practical Modulation, Pick Your Path, and Musical Visualization—as models for implementing creative pedagogy within existing curricular structures.

Ultimately, this study argues that integrating creativity into everyday classroom practice will enhance student learning, increase motivation, and make music theory more relevant to the diverse goals of music students. By reframing creativity as a fundamental aspect of music theory pedagogy, this thesis offers a practical and adaptable approach to improving undergraduate music education.

Keywords: Creativity, Music Theory, Pedagogy, Timothy Chenette, College Music Society, TFUMM, Music Education, Undergraduate Curriculum

Chapter 1: A Curriculum in Crisis

My "Why"

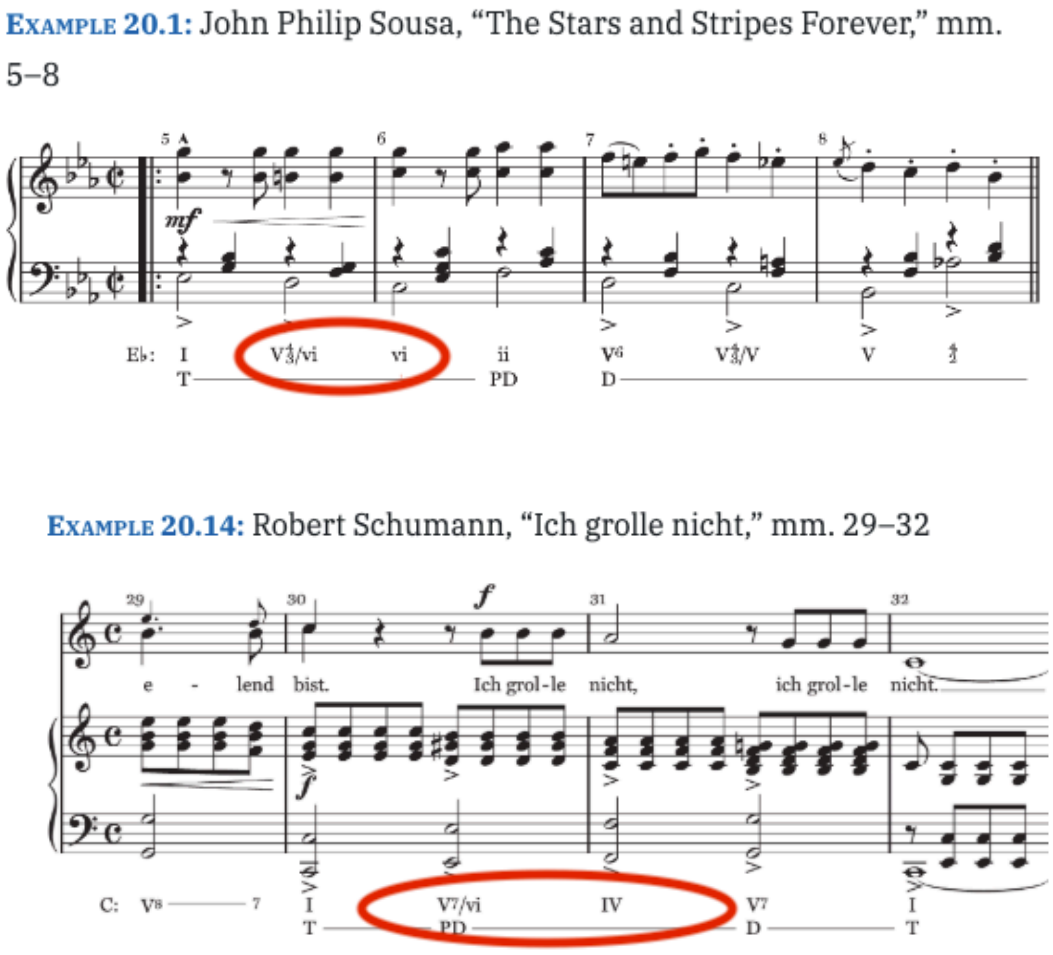
When I attended Ouachita Baptist University as an undergraduate music student, I immediately knew I had found my niche in the music theory classroom. At that time, my perspective of the world was very black-and-white, meaning that I believed there was a right way to do things with no room for change. In my music theory classes, I liked the security that 18th-century music rules and formulas, such as the phrase model (T–S–D–T) and sonata form, created for me. These rules helped me find the true, natural answer to music. I didn't believe it was just the right answer on the exam —— I took the things I was learning in my music theory class and understood it as the way that music naturally occurs. During that time, I didn't consider that music had limitless possibilities. For example, "*ti*" in the soprano doesn't *have* to resolve to "*do*." This resolution may be pleasing to the ear, but there is no natural force or instinct for a melody to follow this motion. The way the curriculum was designed, whether this message was intended or not, taught me that music theory was akin to algebra, where you input values into a formula and out popped the correct answer. I later found out that this was a common occurrence in educational environments, referred to as "the hidden curriculum," which Cora Palfy and Eric Gilson define as "a concept or idea that is implicitly taught through the way courses are structured, content is communicated, conceptual examples are chosen, or by the personal biases of the professor."[1]

If a V^7/vi appeared in a piece of music, the only two possible answers for the next

[1] Cora Palfy and Eric Gilson, "The Hidden Curriculum in the Music Theory Classroom," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 32 (2018): 12

chord was vi, or sometimes IV if the cadence was intended to be deceptive (see **Figure 1.1**). This was the natural way of music, I thought, and it was not to be tampered with. Any deviation from these rules was almost sinful. And I followed these rules methodically.

Figure 1.1. Textbook resolutions of V^7/vi from Jane Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin's *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, 4th edition (2020).[2]



[2] Jane Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin, In *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis (Fourth edition),* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 419 and 435.

But my peers had quite the opposite experience. A few of them didn't understand the rules themselves, but most of them didn't understand *why* the rules were so important. "Why am I learning how to analyze figured bass? I don't care." they would say. Insistent that the musical rules mattered, my answer to them was "because that's the way Bach did it, and Bach wrote some really good music." And their rebuttal would be "I'm not trying to learn to be a Baroque musician. I'm going to be a recording artist (or a band director, or a mental health therapist)". Despite my best efforts, I was unable to offer them a reason for my infatuation with music theory, and it upset me that my peers couldn't see the beauty and usefulness in music theory that I saw. While I was learning multiple skills to express myself with music, they were learning a completely different lesson which inhibited their self-expression and creative ideas.

I knew at that moment that I wanted to be a music theory teacher. There had to be a way that I could share my passion for the music theory "rules" that I learned without insinuating that following those rules was the natural or only way to understand music. In fact, I had come to realize that these rules had begun to inhibit my own studies. Once I finished my fourth and final semester of music theory, I started composition lessons with my theory professor. As I composed my own pieces, I strictly adhered to 18th-century style of composition, but I was often unhappy with my writing because it didn't sound the way I wanted it to. My professor suggested that I separate the "rules" of classical music from the music I was writing, but I couldn't do it. I believed that all music was restricted by these rules.

During the first semester of these lessons, I wrote a choir piece that resembled a Bach-style chorale and a piano solo that resembled a Classical sonata exposition. Although I did not set out

to write in either style, I wrote in the way that I had been taught in my music theory courses. When my professor noticed this restriction that was happening, he suggested that we begin to refer to the "rules" as "*guidelines* of 18th-century music" instead. In learning to say "guidelines of 18th century music" instead of "rules", I dramatically changed my thought process and my music started to sound less like a Bach chorale and more like a creative expression of my own. I still had the tools that I'd learned in my theory courses in my pocket, but over time this change in terminology allowed me to understand that these guidelines were specific to the common practice period style, and that they are useful, but not natural to music by any means. This realization that tendency tones and harmonic function were not natural, but rather the normative characteristics of a specific style of music to expand upon helped me accept my creative side and allow myself to "break the rules", as my former self would have understood it. Changing my mindset now allowed me the freedom to do as I wished. I still knew historical compositional techniques that I could use, and it also inspired my techniques in other styles, but I was no longer limited by the normative characteristics of Western Art Music. My only obstacle now was figuring out how I could teach a creative and relevant approach to musical guidelines in my future theory classroom. This change in mindset inspired me to continue my education and pursue a graduate degree in music theory at the University of Oklahoma.

During my graduate studies here, I have witnessed several other professors' interpretations and teachings of music theory, and I have had the opportunity to develop my teaching philosophy through serving as an instructor for the aural skills curriculum at OU. These experiences as a student and now teacher of music theory lead me to ask a central pedagogical question that motivates my thesis: "How can undergraduate music theory be taught in a way that

cultivates both creativity and relevance for my students?"

The biggest goal that I have for my students is for them to graduate from my class having the skills to use music theory to create the music that they wish. That may be skills they learned from figured bass realization, verse-chorus form analysis, enharmonic spelling of chords, the rule of the octave as it is used in American jazz, or any other technique that they found interesting or helpful. In order to do this, though, my students must have a broader understanding of the creative process.

Based on the experiences described above and numerous conversations with students, peers, and professors, I believe that the core deficiency of the current American music theory curriculum is the lack of encouragement of and teaching of creativity. While many reform efforts focus on content selection or curricular structure, this thesis argues that the central deficiency of current music theory pedagogy is the absence of creativity as an explicitly taught skill. Without addressing pedagogy in the everyday classroom, changes to repertoire or curriculum design are unlikely to resolve issues of student disengagement; instead, they risk repackaging the same limitations in a different musical context.

A Curriculum in Crisis and Some Answers: Creativity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The 21st-century music program comprises a diverse population of musicians with expertise in many different styles, from many different backgrounds, with many different interests. Music programs across the country are comprised of students who are interested in becoming experts in the music industry, students who want to perform classical, pop, country, and/or many other kinds of music as a career, and students who want to lead a worship band at

their church. Some students are interested in composition for bands, films, and commercials, and others are unsure of their path but are confident that they want music to be their career. Many others will graduate with a music degree but end up in an unrelated career field. Given these drastic differences across the music student population, how do we, as educators, ensure that we teach music theory in a way that serves all of these students appropriately? How important is it for them to be experts in 18th- century figured bass realization? Will these students look back at their music degree, specifically to their four-semester music theory classes, and remember the intricate details of sonata form? Perhaps more importantly, do they need to?

Student experiences such as mine and my peers detailed above and those studied by pedagogy scholars show that the current theory curriculum is not serving our students appropriately. For example, theory scholar and pedagogue Jennifer Snodgrass shares a rather relatable anecdote that supports the need for curricular change in her 2020 book *Teaching Music Theory: New Voices and Approaches.* During one lesson on harmonic dictation in an ear training course, Snodgrass recalls a music therapy student asking "Why do I need to know this? I'm going to be a music therapist. I will never have to write out the soprano and bass line after it is played on the piano."[3] Like Snodgrass, I also agree that students are not asking these questions to avoid work or to be "difficult". They are asking them out of a desire to better understand the material and how it applies to them, and how they can use it to reach their career goals. Snodgrass recalls that she was shocked by this question, and that it had never occurred to her before that the things she teaches may not be relevant to all of her students. She explains in the

[3] Jennifer Snodgrass, "The Golden Circle: 'Why,' 'How,' and 'What'." In *Teaching Music Theory: New Voices and Approaches*, (Oxford University Press, 2020), 12.

remainder of her book how she found her "why" of teaching music, and how by doing that ourselves, we may better understand our students today. If we do not show students the relevancy of music theory, then students graduate from their theory courses and as soon as they leave the classroom, their knowledge of harmonic function, modulation, and formal analysis becomes seemingly no longer useful. How do we, as music theory teachers, remedy this issue? Is it an issue? The College Music Society's (CMS) Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major conducted a study in 2013 to research answers to this question.

Inspired by previous attempts for music curriculum reform, such as the Yale Seminar (1962), the Tanglewood Symposium (1967), and the National Standards for the Arts-Music (1994), the College Music Society's Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major or "TFUMM" for short, was formed by then-CMS president Patricia Shenan Campbell to conduct a study and put together recommendations for an undergraduate music curriculum for the 21st-century musician.[4] Their findings were distributed a year later in 2014 and subsequently published in 2016. The goal of TFUMM was to understand the shortcomings of current music education and present ideas on how to fix it. In particular, they considered the following questions:

> What are the central issues related to being a musician in the 21st century? How might one assess the litany of appeals for reform of music in higher education that have arisen over the past 50 years? What contributions can music study make to broader educational and societal issues...?"[5]

[4] Patricia Shehan Campbell, David Myers, Ed Sarath, Juan Chattah, Lee Higgins, Victoria Lindsay Levine, Timothy Rice, and David Rudge, "Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors, Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," *College Music Symposium* 56 (2016).
[5] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 1.

After a year and a half of research, the report by TFUMM concluded that "…nothing short of rebuilding the conventional model from its foundations will suffice."[6] For these authors, past attempts to reform and revitalize the music curriculum for the 21st century have failed because they did not call for fundamental and deep changes to our models of education. TFUMM's vision offers a solution that replaces the current "interpretive performer identity" with the "improviser-composer-performer identity," an identity which will serve a greater variety of music students. The "interpretive performer identity", for TFUMM, is the identity that the traditional music theory curriculum aims to produce. It references a student who uses analytical, theoretical knowledge with the goal of performing score-based repertoire, such as European classical music. The "improviser-composer-performer identity" expresses TFUMM's desire to make composition and improvisation an integral part of the music curriculum, while still valuing its performance aspects. Furthermore, the authors argue that current pedagogical practices would fall more in line with the Common Practice tradition. As they write:

> If Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Schumann, and Liszt were alive today, their musical lives would more likely resemble today's creative jazz artists (and other improvisers-composers-performers) than the interpretive performance specialists whose repertory was created in and for another time and place.[7]

From this perspective, the improviser-composer-performer identity would be returning to the European tradition while also remaining relevant to the demands of the 21st-century musician. In response to the recognized ongoing gaps in education, TFUMM narrows their proposed solutions to three pillars: creativity, diversity, and integration.

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[6] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 1.

[7] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 1–2.

Creativity, for these authors, does not merely mean the creative act of performing music. Rather, creativity is discussed as a skill resulting from composition or improvisation.[8] The authors of TFUMM compare the performing arts student to the visual arts student, who "could not gain a degree without producing a portfolio of original creative work."[9] TFUMM then aims "to restore improvisation and composition to their rightful, foundational status, not by subordinating performance and analysis, but by rendering the entire scope of music study as a creative and highly-skills endeavor."[10] By doing this, TFUMM envisions that often-marginalized disciplines will begin to see the relevancy of their music classes more clearly.

Relatedly, since creativity has been practiced in many musical traditions, not just classical music, the TFUMM report also argues for the importance of diversity in musical genres and traditions as another central pillar. They recognize the limited engagement that music programs offer with non-European classical repertory and say that the improviser-composer-performer identity cannot be achieved with such limited engagement, so introducing more diverse influences into the music classroom will allow this identity to come to fruition.

Finally, to inspire creativity and evermore diverse ways of understanding music, TFUMM also advocates for integration within music classes. Currently, "performance studies are separated from theoretical studies, both of which are taught separately from historical and cultural inquiry."[11] TFUMM recognizes the attempts that have been made for integration, such as the sharing of musical examples between ensembles, theory, and history classes, but TFUMM

[8] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," iii.
[9] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 4.
[10] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 5.
[11] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 6.

views these attempts as "piecemeal" and insufficient.[12] TFUMM suggests that if teachers encourage creativity (composition and improvisation) in all sections of the music curriculum, then the resulting curriculum will become more integrated. "Improvisation and composition contain aspects of performance, theory, aural skills, rhythm, embodied engagement, and historical, cultural, and aesthetic inquiry".[13] TFUMM advocates for integration through creativity and diversity, and by integrating classrooms in this aspect, the music curricula will be much more connected and productive for the improviser-composer-performer.[14] While I agree overall with the values and goals of the TFUMM report, I question the decision to limit and hierarchize creativity as primarily improvisation and composition. What do we lose when we use this limited definition? And what can we gain from reopening its boundaries to be so much more?

Creativity as a Solution: Methodology and Limitations

To narrow the scope of my thesis, I will focus on the first pillar, creativity, and how it impacts my home discipline of music theory specifically. First, this document seeks to focus on creativity because my research and experience have led me to believe that implementing creativity into our classrooms will prove to be very beneficial and helpful for our students and will help them succeed in both their musical and non-musical goals.

Second, my focus on creativity is inspired by scholarship on this topic in the field of music theory pedagogy itself. In particular, my central argument for encouraging creativity in the classroom is similar to that of music theorist Timothy Chenette. Chenette focuses his research on

[12] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 6.
[13] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 6.
[14] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 6.

the psychology of creativity and ways to incorporate the skills into the classroom. He has written many articles on this topic, such as "Creativity in the College Music Classroom: Guidelines for Effective Integration" (2016) and "Part Writing Can Be Student Centered" (2018), both of which I reference in chapter two. His textbook *Foundations of Aural Skills* (2022) which was cowritten by Chenette, Daniel Stevens, Meghan Hatfield, and Ryan Becker, incorporates many creative activities throughout the text.

In particular, my thesis will draw on Chenette's definition of creativity as "the generation of novel ideas that have value or are appropriate to the domain in which they exist."[15] This definition is much broader than the TFUMM definition, and it accounts for creativity of all types. With this definition, many more activities can be considered creative, including composition, dance, analysis, performance, or simply a new idea. To foster this kind of creativity in the classroom, he offers six practical strategies which I will unpack further in my next chapter: 1) Understand and take advantage of the relationships between knowledge and creativity; 2) Use examples productively; 3) Provide down time; 4) Maximize productive forms of motivation and minimize disruptive forms of motivation; 5) Create a safe environment; and 6) Encourage collaboration.

Of course, Chenette was not the first person to develop and use such strategies in the classroom setting and beyond. In particular, he draws from education and psychology experts such as Sir Ken Robinson, Teresa M. Amabile, Robert J. Sternberg, Keith Sawyer, and Mark A. Runco to offer "Guidelines for Effective Integration" of creativity which he maps onto the music

[15] Timothy Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom: Guidelines for Effective Integration," *College Music Symposium* 56 (2016): 3.

theory classroom.[16] In so doing, Chenette sets a foundation for future scholarship, including this document here, to more thoroughly consider the fruitful connection between creativity research and music theory pedagogy research .

In general, Chenette outlines how these six strategies can increase student achievement, interest, motivation, knowledge, and overall creativity. Knowledge and creativity go hand in hand – knowledge is essential for creative processes to happen, and creativity is proven to help students memorize and better understand classroom material. Productive examples, which Chenette explains as student examples (perhaps from previous semesters), can also increase student creativity by showing students what to strive for when completing their assignments. Down time, or time spent away from a task, helps students understand the assignment, have time to subconsciously wrestle with it, and may end up producing more creative results. Understanding the different types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, and using both effectively helps students with the creative process as well. Chenette explains how the creative student hides in unsafe environments due to fear, but creativity excels in a safe environment that is free of judgement, fear, and disrespect. And finally, Chenette advocates for collaboration in the classroom in a way that demands input from everyone, not just the one or two people that groups typically rely upon. Understanding creativity and using these strategies to foster it, Chenette argues, will result in more motivated, knowledgeable, and creative students, and will make music theory seem more useful and relevant for today's music students.[17]

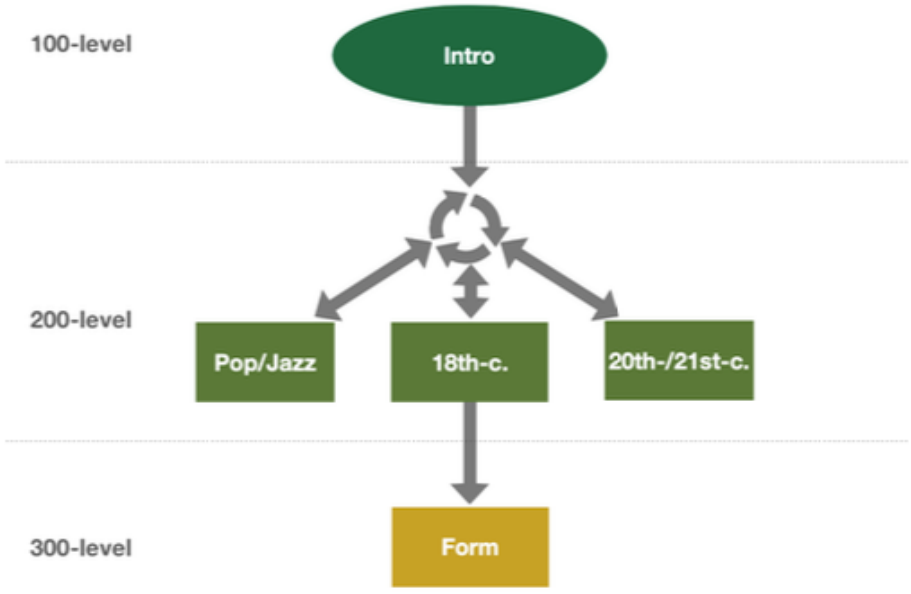
In addition to Chenette's work on creativity in music theory pedagogy, my research

[16] Timothy Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom: Guidelines for Effective Integration," *College Music Symposium* 56 (2016): 2.
[17] Timothy Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom: Guidelines for Effective Integration," *College Music Symposium* 56 (2016).

is also in dialogue with other scholarship on curriculum reform in music theory based on TFUMM's recommendations. Some of these responses were published in a special issue of the journal *Engaging Music Students: Essays in Music* Pedagogy from 2020. For example, in Megan Lavengood's contribution to this issue titled "Bespoke Music Theory: A Modular Core Curriculum Designed for Audio Engineers, Classical Violinists, and Everyone in Between," she proposes a modular approach to the music theory curriculum instead of a traditional one-size-fits-all approach to theory coursework.[18] Her model, which she has implemented at her institution at George Mason University, includes a 100, 200, and 300-level that represents prerequisite courses (**Figure 1.2**). The 100-level course is an Intro to Music Theory course that all students must complete. For the second semester of the program, the student chooses a 200-level course with options including Pop/Jazz Theory, 18th-century Theory, and 20th- and 21st-century Theory. The student chooses the course that they are most interested in or that aligns with their goals. For the next semester, if their program requires, they may choose another 200-level course, or those who took 18th-century Theory may progress to the 300-level course, which is Musical Form. This model is designed to allow music theory to be more personalized and centered on student interests and individual goals which aligns with the suggestions offered by TFUMM to create more "student-proposed pathways."[19]

[18] Megan Lavengood, "Bespoke Music Theory: A Modular Core Curriculum Designed for Audio Engineers, Classical Violinists, and Everyone in Between," *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 7, (2020): 2, https://doi.org/10.18061/es.v7i0.7362.
[19] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," 11.

Figure 1.2. Flowchart of the possible paths through the theory curriculum at George Mason University.[20]



Trevor de Clercq has a similar solution to Lavengood in his contribution to the same journal issue. His solution is to teach the first semester of music theory using strictly popular music. This first semester overviews what he considers to be "style-agnostic" concepts, such as triads, seventh chords, and rhythm, as well as the bVII as a common harmony in popular music.[21] The second semester focuses on chromatic harmony, modulation, and tonicization. In this curriculum, there is no mention of parallel fifths or tendency tones until the student has progressed to the third semester, a course on Common Practice music taken if their program requires or if students possess an individual interest in the topic. This curriculum would allow the students to study new information in a musical setting that they are likely

[20] Lavengood, "Bespoke Music Theory," 2.
[21] Trevor De Clercq, "A Music Theory Curriculum for the 99%," *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 7, (2020), https://doi.org/10.18061/es.v7i0.7359.

familiar with (popular music), rather than teaching them new information with music that they are less likely to be familiar with (classical music).

The two reform attempts I have discussed above are primarily focused on the two latter TFUMM pillars, diversity and integration. De Clercq and Lavengood are both attempting to make music theory more relevant for the 21st-century musician by diversifying the curriculum and integrating it within each student's major area of focus. Furthermore, these two visions of reform offer larger-scale change rather than a roadmap for what to do in the everyday classroom setting. To respond to this gap, my goal for this thesis is to offer pathways for change in the daily classroom rather than the overall degree plan. As Chenette writes, "many of us assume that the study of music inherently involves creativity. Yet merely interacting with a creative art does not guarantee creative practice... ."[22] Though students may see popular music as more creative than classical music, changing the musical genre that we teach does not teach them how to be creative themselves. By changing the art we study, but not changing anything about our pedagogical methods, we may see similar patterns of student dissatisfaction, lack of creativity, and a misunderstanding of music theory. I argue that the problems we are facing in terms of relevancy and engagement that TFUMM outlines, are not only a result of the material we teach, but rather the way that we teach it—the "how" as the title of my thesis points toward. Strictly revising repertoire and curriculum structure without focusing on pedagogical change may not address the underlying causes of student disengagement.

In this thesis, I ask the question: "How can undergraduate music theory curriculum be made more relevant to contemporary music students by cultivating creativity as a central

[22] Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom," 1.

pedagogical skill?" In my first chapter, I have discussed my inspiration for this research, discussed the current position and proposed changes in music theory curricula, offered different attempts at curricula change that have happened since TFUMM, and aligned my views on creativity with that of Chenette. In my second chapter, "Theorizing Creativity," I discuss different definitions of creativity and what it means to make it an integral part of the classroom. I use the writings of music theorist Elizabeth Sayrs to further discuss the TFUMM document, and I detail my understanding of Chenette's six strategies to support my claim that creativity should be an integral part of the classroom, while also drawing on psychologists such as Albert Bandura and Benjamin Bloom. Additionally, I will further discuss Timothy Chenette's six practical strategies, as well as discuss theories on how to correct the creativity deficiency in the theory classroom. Most importantly, I distinguish between reforming *what* we teach and reforming *how* we teach, and I argue that the latter is more consequential. In chapter three, I provide three practical creative classroom activities that I believe will encourage student creativity, which I have designed to embrace Chenette's six strategies and Bloom's Taxonomy framework. I conclude with a reflection of my desire for change, and my hopes that this writing will guide music to better serve the creative and educational needs of their students.

Chapter 2: Theorizing Creativity

Music educators often disagree on the definitions of words in their field – especially the definitions of words such as "music", "art", and "classical" – and the definition of "creativity" is no exception. Musicologists often debate the meaning of "music," asking questions such as "is silence considered music?" or "must music include pitches?"[23] Similar to the term "music," the word "creative" can mean different things for different people. To begin this chapter, I discuss some of the disagreements surrounding the term "creativity" with a focus on how TFUMM understands creativity and Sayrs's response to their definition. This discussion then leads me to the definition that I find most convincing and helpful to our students offered by Chenette.

As discussed above, TFUMM views true musical creativity as a skill that solely arises from composition and improvisation. As the report authors explain, higher-level creativity is "the ability to improvise and compose."[24] This definition aligns with the larger values of the manifesto because it is TFUMM's belief that "...the ability to improvise and compose provides a stronger basis for educating musicians than does interpretation (of existing works)... ."[25] Since it is TFUMM's goal to replace the "interpretive performer identity" with the "contemporary improviser-composer-performer identity," this definition supports their argument for compositional and improvisational activities in the classroom. TFUMM's initial reason for the 2014 study was to "consider musicians' roles in public life and how the curriculum might better

[23] Philip Alperson., *What Is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 3.
[24] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," iii.
[25] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," iii.

reflect relevant needs, qualities, knowledge, and skills."[26] This definition, however, only addresses students whose goals fit the "contemporary improviser-composer-performer identity." This is not to say that composition isn't helpful for anyone who studies music, as focusing on composition and improvisation is a great step forward and more applicable than focusing on replicating 18th-century musical norms. However, I argue that this very specific definition still fails to serve students who don't fit the contemporary improviser-composer-performer identity. While I celebrate the efforts for change and the work TFUMM has done to begin this process, I worry that this new contemporary improviser-composer-performer identity remains too limiting for fostering other forms of musicality.

Sayrs expresses similar concerns about TFUMM's approach to creativity in her article "Poking the Pillars: A Preliminary Evaluation of Integration, Diversity, and Creativity" (2016). Sayrs presented an earlier version of this article in a special session of the 2025 Society for Music Theory conference that served as a response to the CMS Manifesto.[27] In her response, Sayrs agrees with TFUMM and also advocates for creativity, diversity, and integration. However, she also recognizes the flaws within each pillar's definition and aims to adjust TFUMM's definitions to better serve the needs of the 21st-century music student. Her primary concern is that the TFUMM definition of creativity "posits a clear hierarchy within creativity, and the highest form(s) of creativity ... are the 'creative processes of improvisation and composition."[28] She sees this definition as limiting and unfair to the many other forms of

[26] Campbell et al, "Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major," iii.
[27] This session also included perspectives by other theory pedagogues and scholars Melissa Hoag, Jennifer Snodgrass, Juan Chattah, and Steve Laitz that were then subsequently published in the same volume of the journal *College Music Symposium* 56 (2016).
[28] Elizabeth Sayrs, "Poking the Pillars: A Preliminary Evaluation of Integration, Diversity, and Creativity," *College Music Symposium* 56 (2016): 1. https://doi.org/10.18177/sym.2016.56.fr.11137.

creativity that exist in music (such as performance, analysis, and/or theorizing).[29]
Although Sayrs does not propose a her own, fully-fleshed out definition of creativity, she does advocate generally for a broader definition that "recognize[s] and cultivate[s] a broad range of creativities that operate across different domains, both within and outside of music."[30]
Creativity is not only applicable to music education——it is applicable to *human* education, and once educators realize this and foster creativity in its entirety, music theory will become more relevant and helpful to majors and non-majors alike.

Considering the concerns that Sayrs raises, what does an appropriate definition for "creativity" in the music theory classroom look like? If TFUMM's definition is too narrow, how broad is too broad? Does a broad definition inherently allow space for student creative expression, or does it just lack specificity for what creativity means? To address these questions, I present two more "creativity" definitions for discussion to compare with the narrower TFUMM definition.

Creativity: An Appropriately Expansive Definition

In his "Creativity in the College Music Classroom" article, Chenette first defines creativity as "the intersection of novelty and value" by drawing on research from a variety of disciplines such as psychology, education studies, computer science, among others. This definition's only requirements for something to be considered creative is to be "novel" and "valuable", which can include skills such as composing, dancing, analyzing, mixing, theorizing,

[29] Sayrs, "Poking the Pillars," 2
[30] Sayrs, "Poking the Pillars," 2

performing, or even just thinking. This definition, however, requires us to define keywords in the definition itself. What is novelty, and what is value?

The Oxford Dictionary defines "novel" as "of a new kind or nature; not previously imagined or thought of; especially interestingly new or unusual",[31] and "value" as "the relative worth, usefulness, or importance of a thing or a person".[32] In regards to music, "novel" would mean anything that a student imagines or creates – whether that be a musical composition, a dance move, a story to interpret a piece of music, or even a slightly different tenor line for the four-part exercise than their classmates. "Novel" is also specific to the student - an idea may not be completely new, but if it is new to them, then it can still be considered to be "novel." For example, if a student is playing piano in a jazz band with a lead sheet for a swing chart, and they play swung eighth notes to accompany the band, this rhythmic pattern is not new to the world or even unusual, but it is "novel," and it took knowledge of jazz style, rhythm, and technique for the student to create. Using this jazz band example, would this novel idea be considered valuable, important, worthy, or useful? I believe it is, because it tells us what the student knows or doesn't know, and as educators, we can use this information to better help our students. This word, "value," is where educators have to put in work to make Chenette's definition meaningful. The value of something (such as is money) is subjective, and it is up to the *valuer* to assign the appropriate value to a thing or action in question. In a music learning setting, the music educator is the valuer and the students' creative actions are the things to be valued. To do this, you must decide: What is valuable to you? I realize this question may

[31] Oxford English Dictionary. *Novel, Adj., Sense 2*. Oxford University Press, December 2025. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1064070928.
[32] Oxford English Dictionary. Value, n., Sense II.6.a. Oxford University Press, March 2026. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5977802293.

take some personal work and deliberation, but as Snodgrass says in her book *Teaching Music Theory*, "...before we can impact those students, we need to know our "why."[33] Learning your "why" will shape how educators approach teaching their students and highlight what they value most about their students' education.

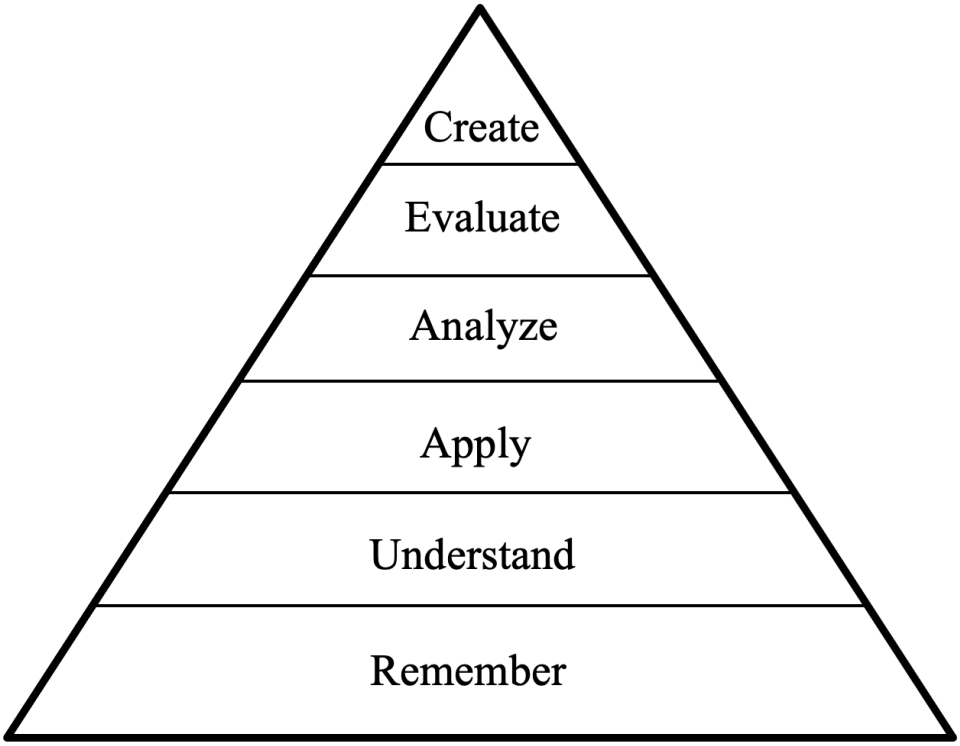
At the beginning of this thesis, I explained my "why" that has led me to value everything my students do or don't do. Their attention in class, their understanding of class concepts, their improvements or lack thereof, and their experiences in class are all valuable, important, and useful. To me, the most valuable trait, however, is how my students use the information I teach them to enrich their own lives and learning. This, in turn, makes their novel ideas the most valuable to me. I understand that some teachers value the students' expertise on part-writing or twelve-tone analysis, but I must ask: if this knowledge is not used to form something novel, of the student's own design, then what was the reason for learning the material in the first place? Is the knowledge only for personal gain, to exist only within the students head forever? When students are taught to use their part-writing and twelve-tone analysis expertise to create something (whether that be an interpretive performance, a composition, a picture drawn to symbolize the music), then the information becomes much more relevant to the student and it becomes more than just a lesson in our classrooms——it transforms into a creation that can further impact the world in an undetermined way. Creativity, I argue, is the most important skill that teachers can teach students.

This relationship between knowledge and the higher-order thinking skill of creativity is expressed in the Bloom's Taxonomy framework, which has been referenced by educators for

[33] Snodgrass, *Teaching Music Theory,* 14.

decades (**Figure 2.1**). In order to promote creativity, educators must also value memorization, knowledge, and analysis, because they all work together, as well as student attempts at creativity as they begin to learn this higher-order thinking skill.

Figure 2.1 A Representation of Bloom's Taxonomy Diagram.



I realize that Chenette's first definition is broad, and one could argue that it is too broad to be helpful. For example, with the freedom that this definition implies, one might imagine that there is no longer a requirement for the student to follow the assignment directions. If a student misidentifies a cadence, one could say that the misidentification was both "novel" and "valuable." It was novel because it was something the student came up with, and it was valuable

because it represents the misunderstanding that the student has about musical cadences. But it is still the wrong answer. Chenette anticipates this issue as well and adds to his proposed definition to form what he calls a "scholarly" definition of creativity: "The generation of novel ideas that have value or are appropriate to the domain in which they exist."[34] This additional requirement, to be "within the appropriate domain," is where the definition becomes applicable to and helpful in music theory classrooms.

To understand this further, I refer back to the jazz pianist example again: a student, who is reading a lead sheet, plays swing eighth notes to accompany the band. This is a novel idea (though not unusual) and it is also valuable to either the student, band, director, or the audience. If the piece being played is not a swing chart but rather a Latin one, then this swing pattern the student plays becomes inappropriate for the domain. The student is still creating something novel and valuable, but if the teacher did not correct the action and teach the student about the differences in composition styles (and the artistic/cultural genre to which it applies), then they would be missing a perfect teaching opportunity. This revised scholarly definition allows for these corrections to happen, without diminishing the student's creative actions.

Chenette provides yet another example: if someone answers the question "how are you?" with "walrus", the idea is novel, yes, but not particularly appropriate or valuable in most situations, and therefore not very creative.[35] Using this definition, how do educators encourage the novel, valuable, and appropriate kinds of creativity in our classrooms? Through his research into the psychology of creativity, Chenette forms six broadly applicable strategies to

[34] Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom," 3.
[35] Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom," 3.

make our classrooms a space where students can learn to think creativity while simultaneously becoming more proficient in music theory. Since Chenette's six strategies inform my own contributions to creativity in the theory classroom in the next chapter, the remainder of this chapter focuses on unpacking these strategies in detail.

1. Understand and Take Advantage of the Relationships Between Knowledge and Creativity

As shown in the Bloom's Taxonomy diagram above (**Figure 2.1)**, memorization and knowledge are the foundation of creativity. Creative activities have shown to increase student attention and motivation, and students usually remember the things they learned during these activities more than in non-creative lessons, such as lectures.[36] Creative activities require students to use their pre-existing knowledge as well as their problem-solving skills to complete the activity, and these activities show students that this knowledge is, in fact, applicable and helpful to the things they may encounter. Myung-Sook Auh found that "two of the greatest predictors of student creativity in music compositions were students' musical achievement and academic grades."[37] This means that the standard lecture-style classroom lesson, designed to teach students new material and encourage memorization, still has a place in the creative classroom. Creativity is meant to complement the lessons and curriculum that are already established, not replace it. Encouraging students to think creatively will not only teach them non-musical skills to use outside of the classroom, but it may also help them understand the musical material, show them the importance and relevancy of the material, and teach them more

[36] Drapeau, Patti. *Sparking Student Creativity: Practical Ways to Promote Innovative Thinking and Problem Solving* (ASCD, 2014), 175.
[37] Myung-Sook Auh. "Prediction of Musical Creativity in Composition among Selected Variables for Upper Elementary Students." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education,* no. 133 (1997).

than a material-focused lecture ever could.

2. Use Examples Productively

For Chenette, a productive example is an example of other people's solutions (specifically when there are many solutions) to a class assignment, which may help demonstrate and aid in the creative process.[38] This can be done in the classroom by showing the work completed by previous students who have done the same creative assignment. It not only shows them what to do, but it also makes the challenge of the assignment seem more achievable (because a peer was able to do it), and it shows them something to strive for (but not copy).

For example, if the assignment is to compose an exposition in keyboard style, a model of a previous student's submission may be more helpful than using another Mozart Sonata, because students will likely have more in common with last year's music student than with Mozart himself. This immediate connection can make the student think "if they can do it, I can do it" and suddenly the assignment will seem less out-of-reach for the student. This is not to say that models of Mozart expositions are not necessary for this assignment —— I am simply assuming that these examples will have been used during the lectures on sonata form. Student examples become useful when the assignment is being introduced.

3. Provide Down Time

"When stuck on a creative task, during an incubation period one. Should do something undemanding that is very different from the main task."[39]

[38] Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom," 4.
[39] Simone Ritter and Ap Dijksterhuis, "Creativity - the Unconscious Foundations of the Incubation Period," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (2014): 7-8, https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00215.

According to Ritter and Dijksterhuis, providing down time has proved beneficial for the creative process, and packing classes full of information with little to no down time has proved to be detrimental to both creativity *and* knowledge.[40] This time away from a task is called "non-conscious cognitive process", or NCCP. In the classroom, a day off in preparation for an exam, a day out of class to give students time to work on their assignment, or for a longer class period (1.5 hours or more) a 5–10-minute break in the middle of class are examples of NCCP. This NCCP time can encourage student creativity, knowledge, and memorization by essentially allowing them time for mental recovery when they have been working on a task for extended amounts of time.

4. Maximize Productive Forms of Motivation, and Minimize Disruptive Forms of Motivation

Chenette's fourth strategy discusses the different forms of motivation and how they can be applicable or helpful in the music theory classroom. Creativity often increases students' motivation in an intrinsic way instead of an extrinsic way. Intrinsic motivation happens when students find genuine enjoyment in an activity, personal challenge, or personal desire to do good. Extrinsic motivation, which happens externally in the form of class competition, grades, or even fear of failure or expected evaluation, may be occasionally helpful and necessary, but it is not as helpful or motivating for creativity.[41] Increased student intrinsic motivation, just like NCCP, will also increase student knowledge and creativity in our classrooms. Although Chenette explains how forms of motivation can be helpful or unhelpful for creativity, he does not elaborate on how

[40] Ritter and Dijksterhuis, "Creativity," 8.
[41] Teresa M. Amabile, "Motivating Creativity in Organizations: On Doing What You Love and Loving What You Do," *California Management Review* 40, no. 1 (1997): 39-44, https://doi.org/10.2307/41165921.

educators can increase student intrinsic motivation – rather, he described ways to decrease the disruptive forms of extrinsic motivation. I would like to add to his discussion ways in which educators can increase student intrinsic motivation.

Psychologist Albert Bandura introduced his theory of self-efficacy in 1977. This section of his social cognitive theory relates to his motivational processes, which he details in his book Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control.[42] "In cognitive motivation, people motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily through the exercise of forethought. They form beliefs about what they can do, they anticipate likely positive and negative outcomes of different pursuits, and they set goals for themselves and plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures and avoid aversive ones. Efficacy beliefs play a central role in the cognitive regulation of motivation."[43] For Bandura, self-efficacy is a person's beliefs about their personal capability of accomplishing a presented task. A person can believe efficacy in writing an English argumentative essay, but inefficacy in performing Mozart's Horn Concerto No. 3 for a live audience. To improve students' self-efficacy, music theory educators must show students that they *are* capable of classroom tasks, even when they feel unsure. For those who are unsure of their creative abilities, educators must take the time to understand where their students are at in their personal and musical journeys, to understand their experiences (both positive and negative), and to create a safe environment for students to have novel ideas. Though Chenette's fourth strategy focuses on increasing student motivation, I argue that educators must first encourage self-efficacy, which can, in turn, improve student motivation.

[42] Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, W.H. Freeman (1997).
[43] Bandura, "Self-Efficacy," 122.

5. Create a Safe Environment

Although using productive examples and encouraging NCCP can support student knowledge and creativity, none of the previous strategies work if the students do not feel safe from judgement, do not feel respected by their teacher and peers, or do not feel capable of growth.[44] A safe classroom environment is essential for maximizing student creativity, and as discussed above, for increasing student self-efficacy and motivation. Especially for the music student, the field in which they study is often essential to the student's identity, and words such as "fail" and "wrong" can make the student feel as if they failed as a person, rather than just failing the assignment, exam, or class. Altering feedback language is essential to creating a safe environment for students, especially when teachers are trying to encourage students to think creatively. Creativity requires risk-taking, and students are unlikely to do this if they think they will be judged or disrespected when they provide an incorrect answer, or even if they feel like their effort may go unacknowledged. For teachers, having a "growth-mindset", which encourages students' improvement and effort rather than their talent or intellect, may lead to an increase in student attention, motivation, and effort, and therefore effect their knowledge and potential for creative thinking.

In order to have a "growth mindset", teachers can start by altering feedback language in the classroom. Psychologist Carol Dweck suggests that praising effort above achievement will increase student confidence and make them feel valued.[45] Saying "I liked the effort you put in. Let's work together some more and figure out what you don't understand" instead

[44] Chenette, *Creativity in the College Music Classroom*, 5.
[45] Carol S. Dweck, "The Perils and Promises of Praise," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 2 (2008): 37.

of just marking "X" on the incorrect answers. Even saying "good try" can make the student feel valued and increase the student's intrinsic motivation to learn more. Negative approaches to questioning, such as asking a student "What did you not understand on this assignment?" can be harmful for their confidence. Oftentimes, the student believes that they do understand the process of the assignment – seeing that they misunderstood the material after putting work in can leave a student asking "Why should I even try?" For a creative assignment, changing our language (and even our grading rubric) to value effort over "correct answers" is even more important. For the student whose identity aligns with the music they perform or write, not being considerate with our words can lead to feelings of academic failure, and therefore personal failure, which instantly erases all of the benefits that our creative classrooms offer. As a result, I argue that a safe learning environment, even though it is listed as Chenette's fifth strategy, is the most effective and therefore most important strategy for student creativity that teachers should aim to accomplish.

6. Encourage Collaboration

In his final strategy, Chenette discusses the benefits of class collaboration for creative thinking. "Group work" is usually viewed negatively by students, and sometimes teachers, as it can lead to social situations where students may feel uncomfortable, or more commonly it leads to situations where one or two group members complete the majority of the assigned work while the other members fail to contribute equally. However, other forms of collaboration may help alleviate such issues. In the music theory classroom, a helpful collaborative activity could be during the part-writing unit, where students of different voice types group together to create a

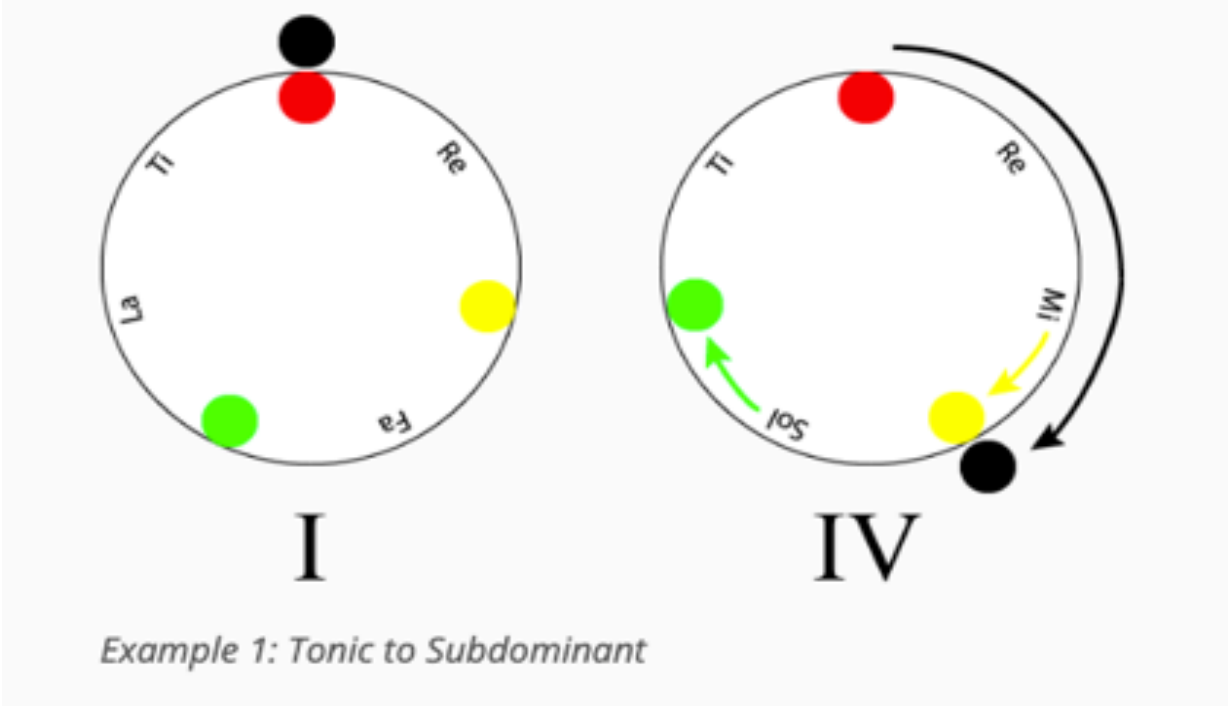
melodic line within their voice range, for a previously-decided-upon progression. Once these melodic lines are created, students could sing their lines together, creating a musical exercise in SATB style.

In his article "Part Writing Can Be Student Centered.", Chenette gives an example of this type of collaboration.[46] In this activity, four students, represented by dots, are assigned vocal roles of soprano (red), alto (yellow), tenor (green), and bass (black), and they stand in a circle with seven chairs representing each scale degree: *do*, *re*, *mi*, *fa*, *sol*, *la*, and *ti* (See **Figure 2.2**). When a chord changes in a given chord progression, the students shift position in a clockwise motion based on their knowledge of Baroque-style part writing: the bass changes to the next chord with respect to its inversion, and the other "voices" move to the appropriate chord tones with respect to tendency tones, avoiding incorrect parallels, and insuring that all necessary chord tones are covered (no missing root, third, or seventh). This format for learning about part-writing allows students to first think independently, and then collaborate in order to not bump into each other (the "frantic scrambling" in **Figure 2.2** below), cover all necessary pitches, and avoid parallel motion, which can be seen more clearly when two people, a fifth or an octave apart, are moving in the same direction. Not all parallel motion is bad, of course, so the students must have knowledge of where the other person or "pitch" is going, where they themselves are going, and if the ending result is appropriate for Baroque-style part-writing. This collaboration encourages independent knowledge, teamwork, and problem-solving, while also making a topic that students may deem "irrelevant" something that can be fun and challenging. Encouraging

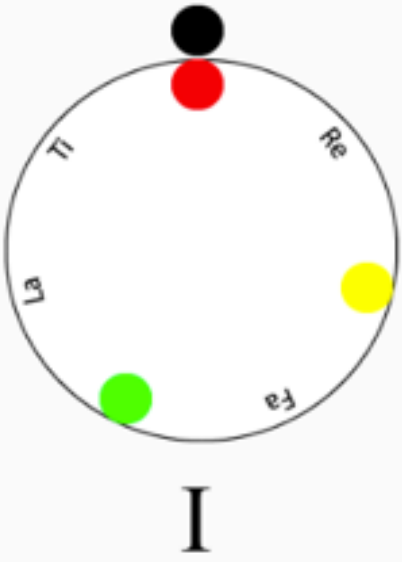
[46] Timothy Chenette, "Part Writing Can Be Student Centered," *Engaging Students: Essays in Music Pedagogy* 6, (2018).

students to work together in productive ways to solve problems and understand class material better can teach students to think creatively and increase student motivation.

Figure 2.2 Chenette's voice-leading movement activity.[47]



[47] Chenette, "Part Writing Can Be Student Centered."

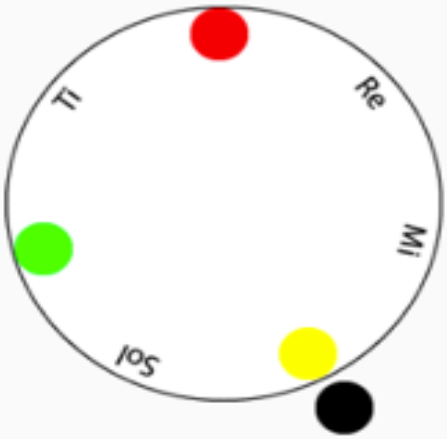


I

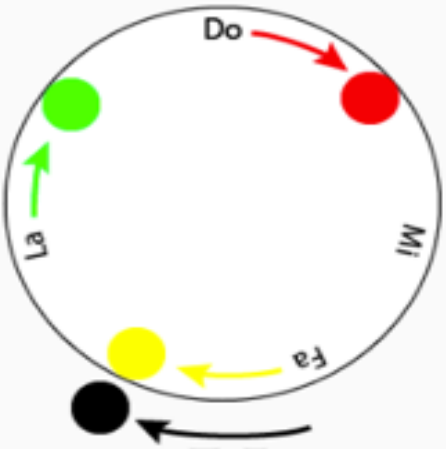


IV

Example 2: Frantic Scrambling



IV



V

Example 3: Parallel Motion

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I overviewed different approaches to defining creativity in a higher education music setting. I started first with TFUMM, which I found to be too narrow, and then I examined Sayrs's and Chenette's differing responses to TFUMM's limited approach to creativity. Ultimately, I argued that Chenette's definition of creativity as "the generation of novel ideas that have value or are appropriate to the domain in which they exist"[48] is one that has both specificity and freedom for possibilities. This definition, which is open enough for many possibilities but also has the "appropriateness" requirement, allows for many creative opportunities for our students, even in ways that are unexpected.

Now that I have overviewed these strategies for promoting creativity, how might we educators implement creativity in our own classrooms, in a practical and useful way? In my next chapter, I offer some examples to shift from explaining *why* creativity matters and *what* it means to *how* to make creativity a central value in the classroom. To bring these ideas of creativity into the classroom, I now fully address the "how" in the next chapter by outlining activities that may be beneficial for students in developing their creativity in music theory.

[48] Chenette, "Creativity in the College Music Classroom," 3.

Chapter 3: Practicing Creativity

Creativity as a Practical Activity

In this chapter I suggest three in-class activities that may help students learn how to use music theory in a creative way, based on Chenette's six strategies and related research from educational psychology. These activities are intended to support a variety of current theory curricula, not replace them. I envision that these activities can be adapted as everyday classroom activities although some of them may be adapted into projects to take the place of an exam. I have intentionally left some parts of the activities open-ended or without a strict, one-way-fits-all activity plan, because I recognize that each music theory classroom may teach material in a different order and in a different setting. Along with the activity explanations, I have listed my intended learning objectives, the ideal class and class size that they will work best in, the expected time commitment so that you can plan accordingly, and the ideal unit for the activity.

Activity 1: Practical Modulation

Learning Objectives: Given prior knowledge of common modulation techniques and harmonic tendencies, the student will be able to compose modulations of an existing melody into a contrasting key.

Class and Size: Music Theory III or IV, any class size

Time Commitment: One 50-Minute class session

Class Unit: Directly after chromaticism and modulation

Instructions: During the end of the modulation unit, create a future-oriented scenario where students are tasked with performing a song of their choice. Explain that the band leader says, "we're going to play the song in C major, and we'll change to E major before the last chorus." To control certain parameters, give students a list of songs to choose from. The songs should ideally have a place to transition, but you can also leave it up to the students to find a place to smoothly change key. A sample list could be: "Let It Be" by The Beatles, "Rolling in the Deep" by Adele, and "What a Beautiful Name" by Hillsong Worship (**Figures 3.1–3.3)**. Provide the chord chart of the songs in C, and provide a worksheet of the same chart, but leave a transitional section and the last chorus without chord symbols. Tell students to write a progression in chord letter names to smoothly modulate from C major to E major in any number of measures and then continue through the last chorus in E. You may decide if you would also like answers to be in Roman numerals to enforce the connection between Roman numerals and letter-chord names. Give students a set amount of time (between 10 and 30 minutes) and allow them to work on their own. If the students have access to a piano lab or

practice rooms, considering allowing them to experiment with their modulations on the piano. If not, this could easily be an aural activity as well, reinforcing the importance of auralization. Circulate the room to offer assistance to those who need it. When the given time has ended or when everyone appears to be finished, have students play their written modulation on the piano, or offer to play it for those who lack confidence in their piano abilities. Have the students explain the type of modulation they chose, how they modulated, and anything they found to be difficult. To promote student engagement further, ask the class to sing along as each student presents their modulation so that they experience the chorus in both the new and the old key.

Figure 3.1a "Let It Be" Original[49]

```
[Chorus]
       Am        G          F          C
Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
C                G              F  C/E Dm7 C
There will be an answer, let it be
      Am         G        F          C
Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
C                G              F  C/E Dm7 C
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

[Instrumental]
F   C/E Dm7 C   Bb F/A G    F    C      x2

[Solo]
C  G  Am  F  C  G  F  C      x2

[Chorus]
       Am        G          F          C
Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
C                G              F  C/E Dm7 C
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be
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[49] Ultimate Guitar, "Let It Be."

Figure 3.1b “Let It Be” Student Worksheet

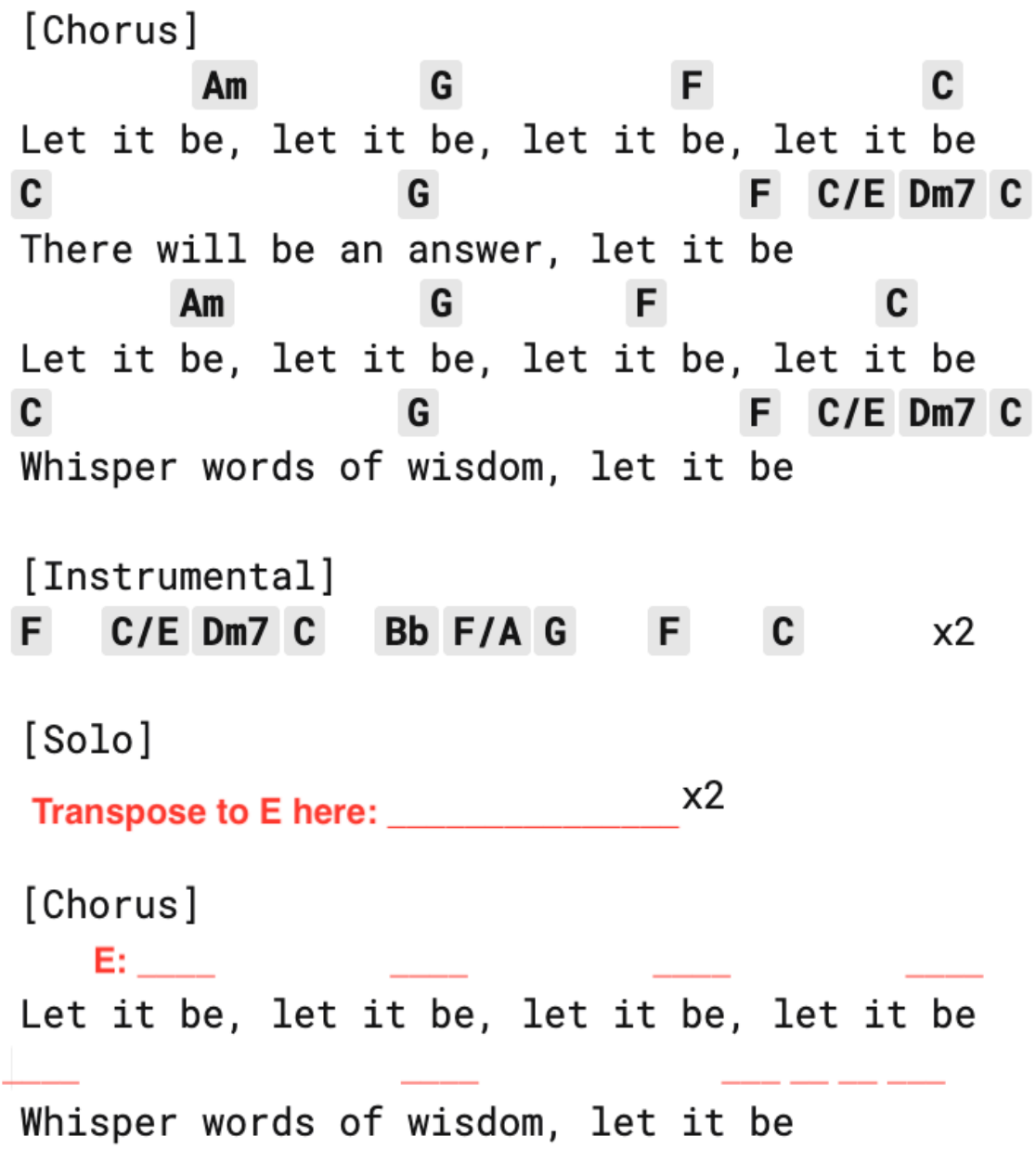


Figure 3.2a "Rolling in the Deep" Original[50]

```
   Bb                Cm                      Bb
We could have had it all...
                     (You're gonna wish you, never had met me)
                Ab
Rolling in the deep
               (Tears are gonna fall, rolling in the deep)
    Bb              Cm                               Bb
You had my heart inside...                 of your hand
                    (You're gonna wish you                never had met me)
          Ab                                Ab                   Bb
And you played it...            To the beat
       (Tears are gonna fall                 Rolling in the deep)

   Bb                Cm                      Bb
We could have had it all...
                     (You're gonna wish you, never had met me)
                Ab
Rolling in the deep
               (Tears are gonna fall, rolling in the deep)
    Bb              Cm                               Bb
You had my heart inside...                 of your hand
                    (You're gonna wish you                never had met me)
           Ab                                  Ab
But you played it. You played it. You played it.
       Bb             Cm
You played it to the beat.
```

[50] Ultimate Guitar, "Rolling in the Deep."

Figure 3.2b "Rolling in the Deep" Student Worksheet



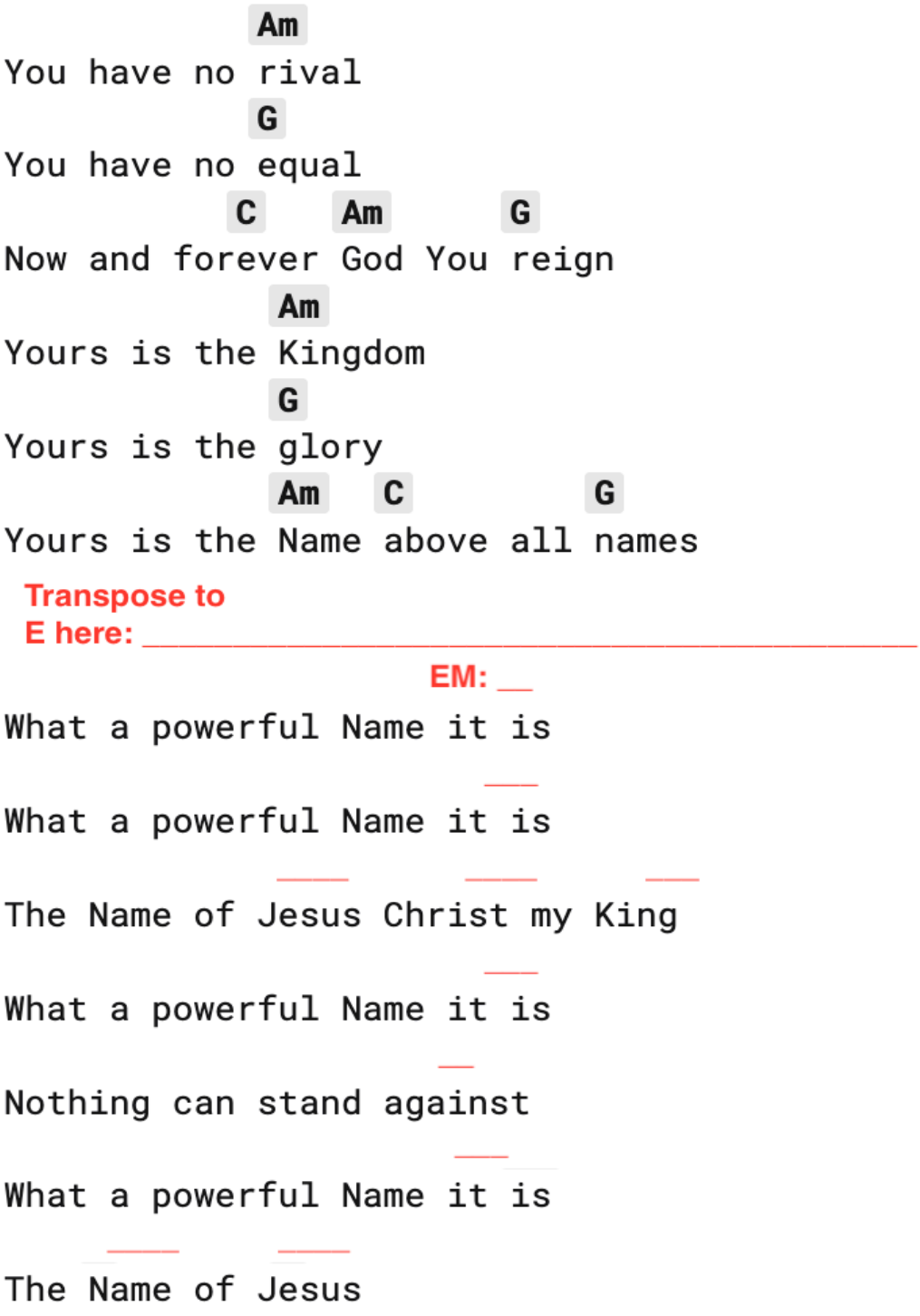
Figure 3.3a "What a Beautiful Name" Original[51]

```
              G
You have no equal
            C    Am      G
Now and forever God You reign
              Am
Yours is the Kingdom
              G
Yours is the glory
              Am   C         G
Yours is the Name above all names

[Chorus 3]
                           C
What a powerful Name it is
                           G
What a powerful Name it is
            Am    G         F
The Name of Jesus Christ my King
                           C
What a powerful Name it is
                     G
Nothing can stand against
                           Am
What a powerful Name it is
    G        F
The Name of Jesus
```

[51] Ultimate Guitar, "What a Beautiful Name."

Figure 3.3b "What a Beautiful Name" Student Worksheet



Expected Results: When the activity is complete, students should be able to formulate multiple different modulations with passages at various lengths. Two possible examples of acceptable modulatory progressions could be "Cm – Bdim4/3 – F# – B7 – em [Cm: i – viio4/3 – Em: V/V – V7 – i]" where the viio4/3 functions as an enharmonic diminished seventh chord modulation, or "C – G7 – B7 – E [C: I – V7 – E: V7 – I]" where the V7 in C major functions as a Gr+6 in E major. By doing this activity, students are put in a "real-world" scenario where their knowledge of music theory will prove useful. Students are required to use their knowledge of harmonic function, pitch tendency, and tonal center to create their own modulations. For instance, when students are deciding how to arrive in E, they should be able to identify that a dominant functioning chord is needed to resolve into E. Now they must figure out how to get to a B^7 chord, or perhaps a D#dim7 from C. This knowledge of harmonic function and pitch tendency may now seem more useful than it did when part-writing in chorale style. This activity may also help students develop their understanding of the relationship between roman numerals and chord letter names, as well as their transpositional skills (which is why I've included the last chorus and left it blank).

Activity Modifications: If every aspect of this activity doesn't work for your classroom, there are many small changes you could make while retaining the basic learning objectives. You may make this a group activity, which would promote collaborative skills. To do this, divide students into groups and have them create a modulation together. You could also make this into a small project or homework assignment, so that students have time to listen to the song or play it on an instrument, especially if they didn't have access to an instrument during class. Another

modification would be to choose a different key to modulate to or from or allow students to choose their own keys. Keep in mind that making this into a project would require you to create a grading rubric, whereas this in-class activity can be graded based on participation.

Core Concepts: This activity addresses a central issue identified in Chapter 1: Students often fail to see the relevance of theoretical concepts outside of class exams and homework. By placing modulation within a performance-based scenario, students must apply their knowledge of harmonic function in a practical and creative context. This aligns directly with Chenette's principle that knowledge and creativity are interdependent, as students use existing theoretical knowledge to generate new musical ideas. In doing so, the activity demonstrates that creativity can function as a bridge between theoretical understanding and real-world musical application.

Activity 2: Pick Your Path

Learning Objectives: Given prior knowledge of moveable-*do* solfege and pitch tendencies, the student will be to improvise a vocal line of a given chord progression

Class and Size: Post-Fundamentals Music Theory, any class size

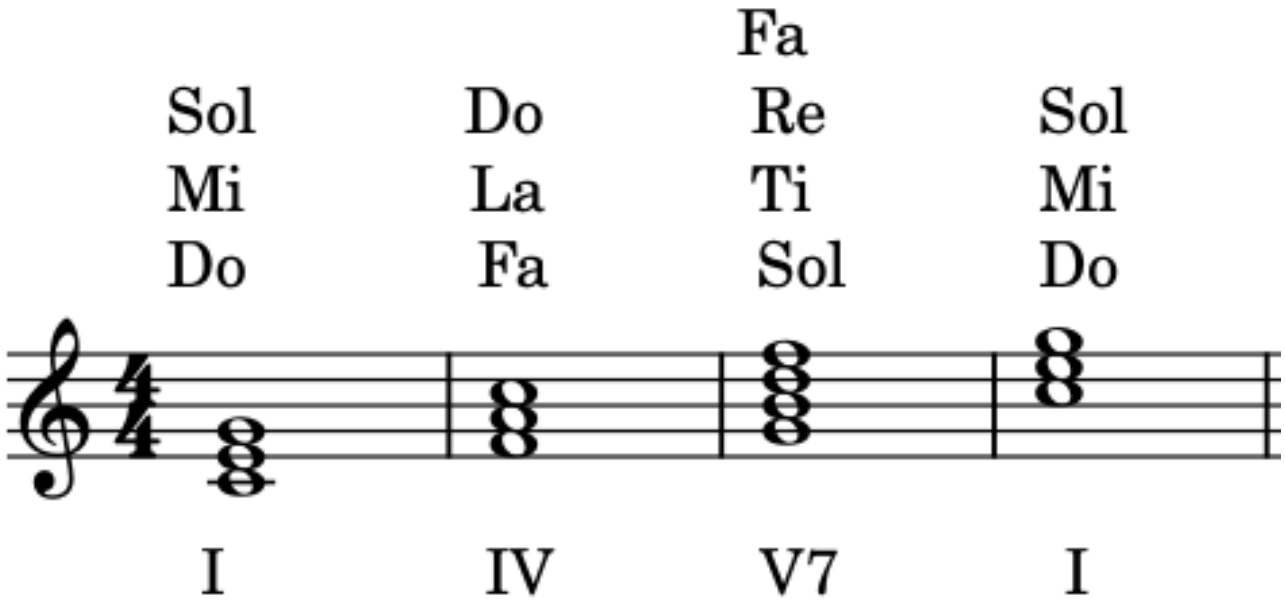
Time Commitment: 5-10 Minutes

Class Unit: After Species Counterpoint or SATB Part-Writing

Instructions: When discussing a chord progression in class, have students sing the progression in solfege in an ascending-descending fashion. For example, I–IV–V^7–I would be "*do-mi-sol-mi-do, fa-la-do-la-fa, sol-ti-re-ti-sol, do-mi-sol-mi-do.*" With the syllables written out for student

view, direct students to create their own vocal line within the progression. Explain with the previous progression example, that students could sing "*do, fa, fa, mi*", "*mi, fa, ti, do,*" or any "path" that they choose, with respect to harmonic tendencies (See **Figure 3.4**). Give students ample time to auralize the progression, and then have students sing the progression. Repeat as desired, directing students to choose a different "path" each time.

Figure 3.3 Diagram of a I– IV–V^7– I progression in C major with solfege.



Expected Results: When I led this activity in my own aural skills class, my students explained that the process reinforced students' understanding of pitch tendencies, pitch stability, and harmonic function, while training them to use their ear to hear such tendencies. In addition to using their ears, the activity reinforced their theoretical knowledge when they heard the "stability" or "instability" of the pitches.

Activity Modifications: This activity can be changed to better fit the needs of your classroom, or to encourage more creative thinking. You may choose a chord progression that aligns with your current unit, whether that's diatonicism, chromaticism, modulation, sequences, or any other unit. You may also decide to let the students write the chord progression, encouraging compositional skills and requiring further knowledge of harmonic function. A progression from a class-favorite song or piece may work as well. If you're wanting to encourage student confidence or performance skills, you could ask for volunteers to improvise a solo over the class while the other students "pick their path" in the progression. This activity has many opportunities for creative thinking, and I encourage you to take it as far as your students are comfortable.

Core Concepts: This activity parallels the common SATB part-writing exercise in a method that allows for student musical embodiment rather than strict analysis, and it can build self-efficacy in improvisational thinking.

Activity 3: Musical Visualization

Learning Objectives: Given prior knowledge of harmonic function and musical form, the student will be to express their musical interpretations of harmony and form in different artistic domains

Class and Size: Any Level of Music Theory, Any Class Size

Time Commitment: 20-30 Minutes

Class Unit: Any

Instructions: Ask students to clear their minds of theoretical, analytical listening strategies that are usually enforced during class. Have students listen to a piece of music from the classical genre and draw a picture or write a story about their interpretation of the music in any writing utensil they wish. Allow students to hear the piece multiple times in order to draw or write their interpretations. The intent of this exercise is to demonstrate the connection of art types, and to encourage creative expression in a way that may be unfamiliar. As musicians who are expected to harmonically analyze every classical piece of music, this activity can allow students to engage with the music subjectively and intuitively instead of analytically. Ask for volunteers to share their interpretations once the activity has been completed.

Expected Results: This activity may promote your students' individual interpretation of musical expression by using another art form. After listening to the piece multiple times, students will have written a short story or drawn a picture or abstract idea, displaying their experience with the music.

Activity Modifications: To change this activity to fit your classroom needs, you may choose to change the form of expression to a short story instead of a drawing and keep it as an in-class activity. If you would like students to spend more time on this assignment, you could make it into a group project, where students must write a skit (dramatic interpretation) of the piece to perform in class.

Core Concepts: This activity is essentially allowing students downtime from the intense

analytical practices that music theory typically expects. It creates a low-pressure environment for students to share their ideas, in a setting where no interpretation can be "wrong". Interpretations are inherently "novel", and this activity promotes the creative process where the student must trust their own ideas to create something new.

Connections to Educational Psychology

Each of these activities incorporates Chenette's strategies in some form, but not all six have to be present for an exercise to be considered creative. Using these activities, as well as your own creative activities, will function in tandem with each other to make creativity a seemingly natural skill for your students. **Practical Modulation** and **Pick Your Path** both "take advantage of the relationships between knowledge and creativity," as I've explained in their respective sections. You may "use examples productively" in **Practical Modulation** and **Musical Visualization** to show demonstrate the creative opportunities that both of these activities present. **Musical Visualization** provides down time for students and may also encourage self-efficacy for your students who are more comfortable drawing or writing. In all three activities, a safe environment is essential to begin with, but the activities can also help create the safe environment by encouraging conversations in class and encouraging performances if students are comfortable. Finally, although I didn't include any group activities, I explained how **Practical Modulation** and **Musical Visualization** could be made into group activities with a few modifications.

Chapter Conclusion

The activities presented in this chapter demonstrate that creativity can be meaningfully integrated into the undergraduate music theory classroom without requiring a complete restructuring of the existing curriculum. Rather than replacing traditional analytical approaches, these activities function alongside them, offering students additional ways to engage with theoretical concepts through application, interpretation, and exploration. Each activity highlights a different dimension of creative engagement. The **Practical Modulation** activity situates theoretical knowledge within a real-world musical context, requiring students to apply harmonic function and pitch tendencies in a problem-solving environment. **Pick Your Path** emphasizes aural skills and embodiment, encouraging students to internalize harmonic relationships through singing and improvisation. **Musical Visualization** shifts the focus away from analysis entirely and allows students to interpret music in a personal and expressive way. Together, these activities illustrate that creativity in the music theory classroom is not limited to composition and improvisation alone, but can emerge through listening, performance, analysis, and interpretation.

Conclusion: Continuing Creativity

The goal of this thesis has been to discuss how creativity can become an essential, encouraged skill in the undergraduate music theory classroom. While several calls for curriculum change, such as the College Music Society's Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major (TFUMM) have recently drawn national attention, I have argued that meaningful change must also occur at the level of classroom practice. While theorists such as Lavengood and de Clercq have experimented with major curriculum reform at their respective schools, I believe that more progress will be made when music theory educators focus on how the material is taught and how students interact with it, rather than solely focusing on what they are taught.[52] Otherwise, we are simply changing material to our idea of what "relevant" music is without addressing pedagogical strategies, and hoping that it solves the issue of music theory concepts being seemingly "irrelevant."

More broadly, this thesis contributes to ongoing discussions in music theory pedagogy by shifting the focus of reform from curriculum design to everyday classroom practices. While large-scale institutional changes may be valuable, they are often difficult to implement and slow to take effect. By contrast, pedagogical change is immediate, adaptable, and within the control of individual instructors. This suggests that meaningful progress in music theory education may depend less on redefining curricula and more on rethinking how instructors engage students with the material on a daily basis.

Though my research for this thesis has focused on creativity as a pedagogical change in

[52] Lavengood, "Bespoke Music Theory," 2.
[52] De Clercq, "A Music Theory Curriculum for the 99%".

response to TFUMM's recommendation for curricular overhaul, I envision that making this pedagogical change will reap many more benefits. I would like to personally pursue and engage with further research into if and how creativity can help alleviate the "hidden curriculum" issue that faces music theory programs as discussed in the "My Why" section of chapter one. Furthermore, I believe that creativity will prove more useful than ever before in the coming years – as society becomes more dependent on artificial intelligence, and educators navigate these changes in the classroom, students are losing the skills required to formulate novel ideas by relying on AI instead. The activities presented in this thesis can help educators alleviate this issue by requiring classroom participation and in-class creation and problem-solving, where students can't take the **Pick Your Path** activity home to complete using AI or the internet. This was an unintended benefit of encouraging creativity in the classroom, but further research may be done on how this pedagogical change may help educators offset the unwanted effects of AI.

After reading this thesis, I hope you recognize the importance of incorporating creativity into the classroom and feel empowered and able to do so. I urge you to continue to explore ways in which creativity can benefit your students. By doing so, as well as implementing the ideas and activities presented in this thesis, we can make our classrooms a place where theoretical understanding and musical creativity evolve together.

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Musical Examples

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